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ABSTRACT

The relationship between professionalism and professional organizations is examined in this paper. Standards of professionalism for speech communication personnel vary according to the specialization in this diverse field. Since guidelines can not prescribe accurately what a person trained in speech communication should know or perform in many different areas, speech communication will probably continue an advisory versus a prescriptive approach to professional standards. The author presents five standards which he considers appropriate for speech communication: (1) Have a strong sense of identity with professional colleagues. (2) Have a sincere concern for the development of young professionals. (3) Be active in professional organizations; attend meetings and conferences; read and contribute to professional journals; serve on committees, commissions, and task forces; and vote, nominate, and communicate approval or disapproval on matters of policy. (4) Assume a personal and continuing obligation for maintaining and augmenting professional knowledge and skills. (5) Accept high ethical standards in all professional relationships. The author believes a strong voluntary professional organization should be supported both as a matter of self-interest and as an act of responsibility. (MKM)

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# ON PROFESSIONALISM

William Work, Executive Secretary
Speech Communication Association

An invitation to editorialize is almost irresistible. My thanks both to Editor William J. Jordan and to the Texas Speech Communication Association for giving me this opportunity to set down a few thoughts about professionalism.

The TSCA has long been recognized as one of the largest and most influential of the state organizations. SCA President Lloyd Bitzer joins me in extending greetings and congratulations to the TSCA on the inauguration of this new journal.

"Professionalism" means many things to many people. A profession is made up of a group of people who earn their living by doing something that is different from what other people do. The teaching profession is made up of persons who help others to learn; the medical and nursing professions are made up of people who help others to stay well or get well; a physician or nurse who teaches in a medical school belongs to two professions.

There is a critical distinction that separates professionals from amateurs. Professionalism and earning a livelihood are closely linked. An amateur golfer plays for fun and exercise; a professional makes his or her living by playing in tournaments, by instructing others, and so on. Although some amateurs are more skilled than some professionals, professionals typically excel because they are more competent. When the going is rough and the need is urgent, we rarely seek help from an amateur! In our society, one of the highest compliments that can be paid an individual is to say, "She (or he) is a real 'pro'."

The members of a profession are held together by a number of ties that extend beyond their interest in doing the same kind of work: the knowledge that they share a common heritage, including similarities in their educational



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backgrounds; shared beliefs about the value to society of the work they do; adherence to 'professional' standards of practice and conduct; and participation in collective action to improve the conditions under which they work.

Some professions are more highly organized than others. The consummate professional is not only a graduate of an accredited training program, but he or she has been further "certified as competent" by an independent agency. Professional societies play a key role in determining the standards by which accreditation and certification are achieved. These same societies (American Bar Association, National Association of Broadcasters, American Speech and Hearing Association) set forth codes of ethics and good practice to which members of the profession are expected to adhere. Some professional societies have mechanisms for withdrawing their endorsement of an individual, if she or he fails to live up to established professional codes.

Professionalism in the formal sense, then, is adherence to certain prescribed patterns of training, practice, and conduct. In a less formal way, we think of professionalism as exemplifying the highest standards in the pursuit of any occupation. The thorough-going professional has the knowledge, the experience, the technical competence, the appropriate attitudes, the energy, the stability, the motivation, the political sensitivity, and the interpersonal skills needed to perform effectively. The exemplary professional is also aware of the continuing need for growth, re-assessment, and renewal.

Certifying and accrediting agencies notwithstanding, there are no absolute standards of professionalism. The lawyer who squeaks through the bar exam and then pursues a self-serving career notable mainly for its consistent mediocrity, although 'certified' to practice law, is a far different professional from the lawyer whose brilliance, sense of humanity, and wisdom combine in a career of outstanding public service.

But what of professionalism in speech communication? To begin with, speech communication is a very diverse field. People trained in speech communication do many things. Included are professional broadcasters, professional actors, and professional speech pathologists. Most, to be sure, teach. But there is evidence that speech communication graduates are finding their way into an ever broader range of settings in the world of work: in business, industry, government, and in a variety of public and private institutions and agencies. Teaching professionals assist in the preservation and transmission of a body of principles; they seek, through observation and research, to refine and enlarge that body of principles; and they help others to develop greater proficiency in a variety of communication-related activities. Professionals from our field who are not teachers apply communication principles in a variety of vocational situations.

The broad field of speech communication does not lend itself to the rigid, narrowly-defined patterns of professionalism that, for example, the certified public accountants have created for themselves. The new guidelines for the preparation of teachers of speech communication and theatre that have recently been published are one evidence of professional activity in our field.[1] But, they are guidelines and are not designed to prescribe exactly what is needed to guarantee that a teacher-in-training will become a fully qualified professional. Furthermore, they are immediately pertinent only to a relatively small percentage of the individuals who identify with the speech communication profession. It seems likely that comparable guidelines will be developed for the preparation of professionals in such additional specialty areas as organizational communication, cross-cultural communication, government communication, and so on. It is my guess that our field will continue to favor a stance in these matters that is advisory, as opposed to prescriptive.

Some people have what seems to me a narrow, rigid, simplistic view of professionalism. To such persons, the outward trappings-- the measurable dimensions of professionalism-- seem to be most important. They argue that anything short of full compliance with the established mandates of one's professional peers is an admission of non-professionalism. These people hold that an individual either is or is not a professional, and that the organizations with which that individual is affiliated are either professional organizations or they are not. (There is no "semi-professional" in their vocabularly.) I wonder sometimes whether we don't spend needless energy trying to fit ourselves and our voluntary organizations into pigeon-holes that are too rigidly constructed.

An organization can be whatever its members want it to be. SCA is most responsive to the needs of some of its members through its scholarly activities; for others, professional goals, activities, and projects have the greatest relevance. It is more a matter of "both. . .and" than "either. . .or." It seems to me most important that we do what we do <u>well</u>-- whether as a learned society, a professional society, or even as an "activist" organization seeking to bring about constructive social change. There is a limit, of course, in how far an organization can go in trying to be all things to all people. My own preference in these matters is to err on the side of pluralism rather than on the side of exclusivity.[2]

There are those who are cynical about professionalism-- and often with good reason. To such persons, professional standards are little more than a conspiracy designed to promote the self-interests of the members of the profession. Thus, according to these critics, lawyers delight in their technical jargon, because it helps assure that they will be needed, at a fee, to translate

it; doctors cling to their illegible prescriptions in Latin, fearing that patients may be outraged at being charged a high price for a sugar pill prescription; and railroad firemen persist in riding in the cabs of locomotives, long after the last locomotive fire has been extinguised. Even those of us who are teachers have been known to cling to certain absolute professional standards, not because they were necessarily right for all members of the profession-- or best for society-- but because the administration of flexible standards is so much more difficult. (Why haven't we, for example, been able to work out an equitable system in the schools that rewards longevity and creativity and productivity?). Many years ago, Dr. Samuel Johnson expressed the cynical view when he observed that "the most that could be expected from the members of the same profession was that they should forbear open hostilities and secret machinations and when the whole fraternity is attacked, be able to unite against a common foe."

Professionalism, like most of our society's institutions, runs the full gamut from charlatanism and chicanery to idealism of the highest order. Further, because the range of behaviors of individuals within a profession vary so widely, it is difficult to generalize about professions. It is much easier to measure the performance of an individual against either (a) the standards set forth by the profession itself or (b) one's own standards. As noted earlier, we all have different images of what constitutes professional behavior. To encourage you to examine your own views on these matters, permit me to conclude by sharing mine.

Speech communication professionals:

1. Have a strong sense of identity with their professional colleagues-- both those who are close at hand and those who work in other settings.

2. Have a sincere concern for the development of young professionals.

3. Are active in professional organizations; attend meetings and conferences; read and contribute to professional journals; serve willingly on committees, commissions, and task forces; vote, nominate, communicate approval (or disapproval) on matters of policy; help in the recruitment of new members.

4. Assume a personal and continuing obligation for maintaining and augmenting their professional knowledge and skills.

5. Accept, without coercion, high ethical standards in all professional relationships.

Some years ago, then SCA President William S. Howell asked what I believe are the two basic questions for any organization: "Who needs us? What are we doing for them?" They are deceptively simple questions. If the answer to the first is the members of the profession only, then the organization is taking a very narrow view of its service functions. If, on the other hand, the "who" includes the larger society as well, the organization clearly assumes a broader mission and accepts a greater responsibility. What is good for a speech communication professional, as a professional, may not always be good for everyone else.

In the last analysis, of course, an organization should exist only to carry out for its members, and for society, those functions which, in the hands of individuals, are: (a) impossible, (b) difficult, (c) inefficient, and/or (d) less fun. An organization is a <u>community</u> of persons with shared interests, beliefs, and objectives. The organization provides a forum for the exploration of common concerns and mechanisms for taking action on them. An organization is pre-eminently a communication facilitator.

There <u>is</u> strength in numbers. We live in a world, sad to say, where decisions are made in response to evidences of power. The power of an organ-

ization comes from its ability to truly represent the constituency for which it was created. Every speech communication professional should affiliate with his or her state, regional and national organization. Very few of us can claim with validity that we cannot afford the membership dues. Membership is, after all, in one's own enlightened self-interest. And the dues and fees are even tax deductible.

Quite apart from goods and services received-- and enlightened self-interest-- our scholarly and professional organizations should be supported, as American Council on Education President Roger Heyns recently put it, first and foremost as an "act of statesmanship." If the journal articles are useful, so much the better; if one learns some new and useful instructional techniques at a workshop or a short course, so much the better; if one has the opportunity to test one's thinking against that of one's peers-- by publishing an article or giving a convention paper-- so much the better; if belonging to professional organizations "looks good" on one's professional transcript, so much the better; if one can take part in a project that could not be done alone-- or locally-- so much the better!

While I am not necessarily an advocate of the "union shop," I am certainly sympathetic to the impulses which gave it birth. Too many members of our profession are willing to take the "free ride." They did not work hard to enlighten the authorities at the state education agency, but they enjoy the benefits thereof; they did not collectively examine their consciences on a difficult matter of freedom of speech and take a stand on it, but they claim credit along with those who did; they did not labor to develop higher standards in research and in the teaching and application of the principles of human communication, but their own jobs are more secure because others did; they did not make even a monetary sacrifice in the interest of the common professional

good, but they are quite willing to enjoy the benefits purchased with dollars contributed by others.

Be all of that as it may, we would lose much, I believe, if membership in our organizations were required. A great deal of our strength lies in the fact that we are voluntary associations.

More than 100 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that a notable dimension of the emerging American democracy was the young nation's commitment to collective action through voluntary organizations. He marvelled at the ability of Americans to identify socially significant goals and then to organize themselves-- through purely voluntary efforts-- to pursue them. In this age of big government, big business, and big education, no one should underestimate the importance of the independent voices of our professional societies.

## Notes

[1]Barbara Lieb-Brilhart, et al., "Guidelines for Speech Communication and Theatre Programs in Teacher Education," The Speech Teacher, Vol. 24, November 1975, pp. 343-364.

[2]William Work, "Scholarship, Professionalism, Activism: Toward the Resolution of a Trilemma," Spectra, February 1970.